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## Kropotkin

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**Great Anarchists**

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**PETER KROPOTKIN**

**RUTH KINNA &  
CLIFFORD HARPER**

**Great Anarchists**

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## **RUTH KINNA**

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## GREAT ANARCHISTS

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**T**hese short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt.

Agitate, Educate, Organise!



## PETER KROPOTKIN

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**K**ropotkin has many claims to greatness. An important conduit for the transmission of Russian revolutionary ideas into western Europe and a powerful propagandist for revolution in Russia in the decades leading up to 1917, he spent most of his life tirelessly promoting anarchism as a distinctive political philosophy and revolutionary practice. He played an instrumental role in two of the nineteenth-century movements' most influential papers, *Le Révolté* and *Freedom*, and was generally credited with being the founder of anarchist communism. This is inaccurate because Kropotkin was only one of a group of anarchists who advocated communism in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Still, he took a leading role in winning over comrades who identified as collectivists because they associated communism with rigid Jacobinism and he produced a large body of work explaining the libertarian alternative.

Kropotkin published in literary and scientific journals and newspapers as well as in the socialist and anarchist press. His work circulated in multiple translations and was read by revolutionaries across Europe, North America, Australia, China and Japan. *The Conquest of Bread* was reputedly a favourite of Ricardo Flores Magon and helped him plot the contours of the Mexican Revolution. Kropotkin's defence of nihilistic ethics in *An Appeal to the Young* and his pithy critique of the wage system attracted anarchist as well as large non-anarchist audiences. Working closely with his friend Elisée Reclus, he advanced anarchy as an imaginable, attractive, attainable and sustainable condition. In *Fields, Factories and Workshops* he sketched a proposal for anarchist economic restructuring, based on the abandonment of the division between mental and manual labour, minute specialisation and the construction of self-supporting industrial villages.

Above all, Kropotkin's canonical status rests on the reception of *Mutual Aid*. His systematic analysis of co-operation forged a fruitful link between anarchy and anthropology and transformed a fuzzy idea of interdependence into a hallmark anarchist principle.

It discredited yarns about human wickedness and ropey thought-experiments that centred on the state of nature and its miseries. Kropotkin argued that humans are perfectly capable of making their own rules and arrangements through their ordinary interactions and that the imposition of authority and the concentration of power permanently set social relations on a course of manipulation and lies. The book has left its mark on countless other anarchists including Murray Bookchin, Paul Goodman, Cindy Milstein, Brian Morris, Graham Purchase, Rudolf Rocker, Roel Van Duyn and Colin Ward.

Kropotkin didn't advance a unified, grand theory of anarchism but he did provide a consistent, compelling analysis of the state. Some of the early critiques he published in the *Newcastle Chronicle* were based on his examination of the harsh corruptions of Russia Tsarism. He later exposed the violence of the regime in *The Terror in Russia*. In *French and Russian Prisons* he used his extensive and intimate knowledge of incarceration to flesh out the disciplinary cultures that states fostered. In *Mutual Aid and The State: Its Historic*

*Role* he presented a historical analysis of European exploitation, centralisation, bureaucratisation and militarisation. In an essay in *Freedom* he invoked the idea of 'Caesarism' to talk about the growing nationalistic and militaristic drift of European statism. And in *Wars and Capitalism* he discussed the instability, competitiveness and inherent aggression of the international state system.

Kropotkin is not without his detractors. His decision to back the Allied war effort against Germany in 1914 turned the greater part of the anarchist movement against him. As much as his promotion of anarchist science has excited his fans, it has also sullied his reputation in other quarters. Postanarchists are wary of Kropotkin. However, his consistent, vehement rejection of Bolshevism and vanguard socialism, together with his practical approach to anarchist organising have gone a long way to cement his standing as a potent advocate for anarchist communism.

## **KROPOTKIN WAS A COMMUNIST**

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When Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Carlo Cafiero and Reclus called on their comrades to embrace communism they worked hard to dispel the popular misconception that it was a system of government. It was just a principle of distribution. It meant distribution according to need as opposed to the collectivist principle of distribution according to work. Like collectivism, communism was intended to protect the commons and it entailed a commitment to egalitarianism. The chief difference was that communism meant accepting that people should not be rewarded for their individual efforts.

Kropotkin had three main reasons for recommending communism. First, he thought that individual reward systems encouraged exclusive rights to property ownership. Like Proudhon, he believed there was no moral basis for this. Everything we are and do and possess owes something to the efforts of others. Second, he believed that communist organisation had the

advantage of simplicity. It was difficult to devise schemes to recompense individuals for their work or time or skill. The criteria were always contested and once fixed, they were also inflexible. The results were invariably socially divisive, the mechanisms required to parcel out shares and payments were complex and cumbersome. Third, Kropotkin argued that anarchy would be forever unstable unless communism was adopted because any other system of distribution would eventually result in inequality, domination and the reinvention of the state. Kropotkin was generally critical of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but this was one argument he thought Rousseau had got right.

Kropotkin left the precise determination of needs open. And he also trusted local communities to work out how access to the commons should be organised. These judgements were always context specific and there could be no overarching plan.

Kropotkin's defence of communism got him into hot water with Spanish comrades who called for anarchy without adjectives, feeling that his labelling of anarchy was too prescriptive. It

also put him at odds with anarchists who veered towards Benjamin Tucker, the editor of highly influential journal *Liberty*. Tucker argued that anarchists should respect the right of individuals to possess what they produced and/or the agreements that individuals entered into in order to secure those rights. Kropotkin thought that this form of anti-statism was unstable, even if it was well-intentioned. It encouraged the kind of self-interest and quest for competitive advantage that drove capitalist relations. It was also vulnerable to monopoly and the necessity to uphold individual rights augured the re-emergence of some form of state.

Kropotkin admitted that communism could be implemented in statist systems – one of the objections Tucker raised against him. He agreed with Tucker that Marxism was a form of state communism and that it followed the Jacobin model. But Kropotkin refused to accept that this was a necessary relationship. Unlike statist communism, anarchist communism was based on free agreement.

## FREE AGREEMENT

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Kropotkin talked about free agreement in *The Conquest of Bread* and in *Mutual Aid* but he gave one of his clearest and most succinct statements in his entry 'Anarchism' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Kropotkin explained free agreement negatively by distinguishing it from contract. Free agreement described the kind of accord that liberal anti-statists typically dressed as contract, but it was at variance with it. The difference was threefold. First, contract was static. It had fixed provisions and assumed that contracting parties were equal in status and capability. In contrast, free agreement meant mutability and change and it was driven by the continual adjustment and re-adjustment of social forces that were unequal, complex and diverse. Whereas contracts were enforced with reference to their stipulations, free agreement ruled against the dictation of terms by one party on another and it was inconsistent with the idea of necessity.

The second difference was that free agreement disallowed consents secured through submission

to law and those that depended on obedience to authority. Religious observance and marriage contracts typically fell into the first category. Conscription and taxation were other examples because they were underwritten by constitutionally guaranteed rights to exclusive ownership. Turning to the repressive culture of contract, Kropotkin found the model in the prison system. Predicated on the idea of transgression, prison was designed to crush the will of prisoners, make them docile and break their inner strength. Prison deprived people of their liberty and stripped them of their capacity to live freely. People enjoyed more liberties on the outside but still inhabited worlds of regulated conformity, so still endured constraints on their freedom and suffered similar kinds of repression, albeit with less intensity.

In the third place, whereas law was based on the fear of one kind or another, free agreement was rooted in individual judgement. There was no servility in it because it allowed everyone to decide what they thought was right. Individuals were sovereign: they could restrict or expand their spheres of action and invoke their own moral

standards in deciding how to live. Although the outcomes of their actions were never certain, free agreement released them from the threat of punishment, in this world or any other. In this respect, Kropotkin added a qualification to the idea of ‘rules not rulers’. Rulers weren’t ok but nor were rules if they were based on compliance with someone else’s standards.

In sum: free agreement empowered individuals by guarding against economic domination and strict compliance with prevailing norms. Contract enslaved them by structuring economic inequality and enforcing obedience.

Like contract, free agreement operated in all social spheres: the family, the school, the workplace and in public institutions. Free agreement regulated interpersonal and inter-group relations. It was the glue that held anarchist networks of associations and more formal decentralised federations together. Because it was self-regulating Kropotkin described it as a harmonious condition. By this he did not mean to suggest that it resulted in perfect freedom. It only provided the best protection against the entrenchment of domination and tyranny.

The lesson Kropotkin took from the historical sociology he plotted in *Mutual Aid* was that individuals were essentially social. They might not always behave well or even cultivate sociability. But humans were overwhelmingly found in groups and not in isolation, as conventional philosophy had it. So when individuals exercised their own will they inevitably came up against the traditions, habits, conventions and customs of the group. The mutability of free agreement was assured for as long as individuals were able to extend their liberties and push against the barriers to their freedom by challenging the forms of domination that groups institutionalised.

## **ANARCHISM AND ANTI-STATISM**

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One of the questions anarchists are routinely asked is to explain how their thinking differs from laissez-faire liberalism or anarcho-capitalism. Too often, the critique of the state is used to place anarchists alongside an endless parade of shock-jocks and politicians who call for the

regulative powers of the state to be rolled back. As egalitarians, too, anarchists are put in the same box as right-libertarians who want to give free rein to capitalist market relations – some of them taking their lead from the writings of Benjamin Tucker. This is one reason why anarchism sometimes sends shivers down the backs of Marxists and social democrats.

Whether anarchists should deny the common ground they share with other anti-statists in order to avoid ideological confusion is a strategic question. Kropotkin's answer was 'no'. His view was that anarchists should go on the offensive. They should explain their positions, not give way to critics who were probably not interested in having sincere or open debates in the first place.

This was a perilous approach but Kropotkin decided that the potential gains outweighed the risks. Acknowledging the common concerns that anarchists and liberal anti-statists had about the increasing power and growing interventionism of states, he believed that he could demonstrate the consistency of anarchist-communism with individual self-expression and voluntary association

while also demonstrating the failure of liberal anti-statists to deliver on anarchist egalitarianism. It was important to establish that anarchy was about individual free expression and the rejection of all forms of enslavement: patriarchal, colonial, clerical or racist. And it was possible to urge the refusal to conform and the courage to resist while drawing a line between the spirit of revolt, on the one hand, and aristocratic disdain or naked egoism, on the other. The former was the dynamic for individual and collective direct action against injustice. The latter collapsed into a doctrine of might is right. Kropotkin could likewise agree that state regulation stifled individual initiative while spotlighting the flaws of those non-communist anarchist doctrines that grounded anarchism in the defence of rights. Anarchist communism fostered do-it-ourselves values without exposing social relations to the monopolistic logic of free market or neo-liberal injustice and the legal-statist protections that these doctrines demanded.

So Kropotkin combined a warm appreciation of the liberal anti-statist sociologist Herbert Spencer with a sharp condemnation of his defence of free-

market economics. And he used this critique of Spencer to attack Tucker. Tucker, Kropotkin said, sailed too close to the liberal anti-statist wind and this made his anarchism flimsy.

In his entry on anarchism for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Kropotkin still included Tucker as a member of the anarchist family. He wasn't just being magnanimous or even straightforwardly strategic. He was committed to the principle of diversity and he saw the free flow of ideas as an essential ingredient for free agreement. Casting Tucker and his ilk outside the anarchist fold risked turning anarchism into a form of monasticism. Political parties subscribed to the same programmes and doctrines. Anarchists did not. As a revolutionary, Kropotkin struggled for anarchist communism. As an anarchist communist, he argued that there was no room for compromise with statist systems of domination, be they socialist, libertarian or republican. And as an anarchist he believed that the implementation of any ideal involved continuous struggle.

# Great Anarchists

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**BY RUTH KINNA  
& CLIFFORD HARPER**

1. Peter Kropotkin
2. Voltairine de Cleyre
3. Mikhail Bakunin
4. Louise Michel
5. Oscar Wilde
6. Max Stirner
7. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
8. Lucy Parsons
9. William Godwin
10. Errico Malatesta





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